Getting Out, Getting Over, or Getting By: Social Constructs "On the Streets"

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Statement of the Research Problem

One population that remains problematic to social work service providers are those individuals described as "the homeless." Implicit in this population label is the presumption that such persons are in their current situation solely because of a structural dislocation, specifically around lack of current stable housing. While it is not the intent here to argue against the fact that these individuals are economically disadvantaged and that there are indeed structural deficits, this view implies that the solution to the service provision problem would be simply to develop sufficient concrete service to meet demands. Recently, discontent with the "current lack of stable housing" structural construct has been expressed in the literature, as has a need to move beyond the simple popular definition (Tessler & Dennis, 1989; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfeldt, 1990; Toro, Trickett, Wall & Salem, 1991; Hertzberg, 1992). This dissertation represents one attempt to address the need and subsequently to rethink the service problem. Based on the author's experience as a service provider to the population in question, the dissertation focused on perceived social constructs in service using persons "on the streets," in particular on indigenous social systems.

Research Background

The research took place at the "Street Center," a centralized service coalition in Richmond, Virginia (Pollio, 1990) and consisted of four phases. In the first phase, the ethnographic literature on social groups in poverty situations was analyzed and a series of themes were distinguished. Although this type of literature is generally considered to be of limited generalizability, it has recently been suggested that by considering it as a whole, certain commonalities will emerge that allow for discussion beyond the individual study. The first two themes described the different social constructs used in the major hypothesis and differentiated the conceptual dimensions. In examining this body of literature, numerous examples of the three hypothesized social constructs in individuals and groups were described: 1) for Getting Out, Katovich & Reese (1987), Moore (1991); 2) for Getting Over, Valentine (1978), Ezekiel (1989), Sullivan (1989), Keiser (1969), Vigil (1988); and 3) for Getting By, Bogue (1963), Rooney (1965), Wallace (1965), Cohen, et al. (1989). In addition, some researchers described typologies including more than one of these type groups. Examples of such studies included: Anderson (1978), Leibow (1965), Whyte (1943), Glasgow (1980), and Merton (1968). The third theme distinguished common group constructs and member obligations. The fourth explored the concept of a shared community, while the fifth described relationships with others

not on the streets.

These themes lead to the development of four sets of research questions. The questions were:

1) Is there any evidence for a hypothesis that individuals cluster into hang-out group "types" that are distinguished by certain conceptual attitudinal dimensions?

2) What is the extent to which these individuals see themselves as being embedded in their respective social systems? What is the relationship between the social systems to the individuals?

3) Are there differences perceived by the members between the systems (as well as those not in groups) in terms of interpersonal relational obligations, in understanding the importance of social relations in general, in attitudes towards the future, and in the impact of race?

4) How does the type of social system membership influence current housing situation, employment, service use, and substance use behavior? How does the hang-out group typology compare to standard structural variables in distinguishing these behaviors?

This study tested the hypothesis that persons on the streets adapt to their experience of being disenfranchised by constructing their social world in one of three prototypical ways: 1) *Getting Out*, those who hold mainstream values and norms; 2) *Getting Over*, those who substitute non-mainstream values and norms; 3) *Getting By*, those who reject mainstream values and norms, but do not substitute new ones. The greatest influence on the particular current construction was thought to be the "hang-out" group. These labels were developed from self-descriptions by individuals making each prototypical adaptation. *Getting Out* individuals described themselves as preparing to leave the streets, *Getting Over* as pursuing non-mainstream survival strategies (the term itself is equivalent to an older one--"hustling"), and *Getting By* as existing strictly in the present. These prototypes were thought to be distinguished along the following conceptual attitudinal dimensions: types of employment, service use, group membership requirements, norms around physical location of group, and attitudes toward substances.

Methodology

In the second phase, an open-ended interview was developed and a clinical pretest conducted on thirteen individuals. This pretest was used to examine the constructs as they emerged from the literature review and to allow the development of a closed-ended survey. In the third phase, this survey was administered to a sample of 146 individuals. The sample was generated by dividing the agency into eight "zones" of approximately equal population density, and then individuals were randomly approached within the areas. Although it was the intent to sample them sequentially, because of time constraints (meal areas being open at specific times

of the day), and physical plant problems (the agency closed for five days due to a broken sewer main), the initial schedule required some modification. Over ninety-one percent of those approached agreed to be interviewed. Comparison with a previous sample at the agency (Pollio, 1991a) and with a study with a similar sampling frame (Sosin, Colson, & Grossman, 1988), as well as with national norms suggested that the sample is a reasonable one. In the final phase, after the data had been analyzed, a series of five focus groups were run with members drawn from among the survey participants. These groups were composed of individuals who shared similar prototypic adaptations. Using this multi-stage method allowed for an exploration of meaning beyond a strictly quantitative approach while allowing for a generalizability greater than in a qualitative study.

The major hypothesis was tested through the use of a factor analysis followed by a cluster analysis. First, forty-two items related to the conceptual dimensions were included in a factor analysis (principal components analysis with varimax rotation) in order to verify the proper assessment of the conceptual dimensions developed in the first two phases. From this analysis, six factors appeared to be the best solution. Therefore, a second factor analysis was run, forcing a six-factor solution. Items that loaded heavily on each factor from this second analysis were tested together and index variables were created that used the set (or subset) of items that had the highest intercorrelation.

After assessing the match between the hypothesized conceptual attitudinal dimensions and the indexes that resulted from the analysis, as well as the fit of the individual items, the index variables were standardized and a casewise cluster analysis was performed to sort individuals into sets of individuals who had similar profile responses. Two further variables (current employment status and hang-out group membership) were included in order to address issues of ambiguity in interpretation brought on by missing data. The extent to which the cluster profiles were similar to those described in the study hypothesis was the extent that it was considered confirmed. In solving the cluster analysis, the author attempted to maximize membership within the major clusters while simultaneously maximizing distinctiveness between them.

Analysis of variance between the groups that emerged from the cluster analysis was then used to examine intergroup difference along the dimensions defined in the second and third research questions, as well as for a set of demographic variables. In cases where these variables were dichotomous or nominal level, chi-squares were used.

Results

Out of the conceptual attitudinal dimensions specified in the hypotheses, two of the five (attitudes towards employment and service use) split into two index variables each, physical location norms remained intact, and group membership requirements and attitudes towards substance use fused into a single index variable. The six index variables and alpha scores emerging from this analysis were: attitudes toward alternative employment (6 items, alpha=.77), job search behavior (8 items, alpha=.74), location of hang-out group (3 items, alpha=.88), when benefits should be used (3 items, alpha=.66), independence from services (4 items, alpha=.61), and social group norms (6 items, alpha=.63).The results of the cluster analysis suggest that eighty per cent of the population fit into five clusters: the three "social" prototypes of the initial hypothesis and two "loner" ones that emerged from the cluster analysis--one that paralleled the "getting by" prototype and another that appeared to be a mix of the other two. The study found that the social prototypes accounted for over eighty per cent of those

included in the cluster solution. However, the emergence of two clusters in which the members did not describe having a hang-out group membership suggested that while the group plays an important role in developing personal social constructions, there are other levels of connectedness across the social ecology that also influence the individual. Those who were not included in the typology were also examined. These individuals formed a series of smaller clusters and outlier individuals. Because of the sample size it proved impossible to form any strong conclusions about these cases. However, as a whole those not included in the cluster showed attitudes that more closely reflected what might be considered "mainstream" values. Because of this, it was suggested that these persons might represent individuals who were service users, but did not think of themselves as being "on the streets."

In examining intergroup differences for group embeddedness, it was found that members of the Getting Out cluster belong to smaller, more cohesive and long-term groups, while members of the Getting By cluster belong to larger, more casual ones. For the other exploratory variables, although there were some isolated statistical differences, generally the results suggested commonality across the typology. In some cases, it was argued that the variables required further specification. However, in many instances the focus groups reported that the results were consistent across the entire ecology because they represent a shared perception. Finally, for demographic variables members of loner clusters were more likely to have been born outside of the geographic region, come from smaller families, and be convicted of felony offenses. In addition, there was some indication that the prototypes emerged prior to first entry on the streets.

In terms of current behaviors, across the typology there were some minor differences among clusters in terms of individual services used, but none across any index variables. For employment, members of the Getting Over cluster were more likely to report considering more "alternative" market behaviors. In addition, there were some minor differences in job market behaviors, specifically in reported reasons for leaving a self-identified "steady" job and reserve wage. For housing variables, there was an interaction between whether the individual was currently homeless and typology membership in terms of housing stability, with the Getting Over and one of the loner clusters showing significantly greater length of time currently homeless.

In addition, the typology was compared to a structural explanation (that being on the streets is a result of being without housing and employment). These structural variables were used to run an analysis on current behaviors parallel to the one described in the last paragraph. For service use, structural deficits predicted use of certain related structural services. Individuals who were homeless were more likely to be in shelter, use shower and laundry services, and use a free clinic. Compared to this, there were significant differences within typology in terms of the use of specific entitlements and participation in an employment group. Interestingly, there were no major differences in past employment behaviors or alternative market involvement based on current employment status. Finally, a series of paired dummy regression models were run using current behaviors as dependent variables and either specific typology membership or structural variables as the independent. The amount of variance explained by the typology equations were compared to that accounted for by the structural variables. Across ten pairs of equations the typology variables were able to significantly predict behavior in four, while structural variables accounted for three. Because the two together significantly modeled six equations, it was concluded that the two approaches are complementary--that knowledge of both is superior to knowledge of either separately.

Using focus groups, this dissertation also re-examined the population label "on the

streets." In examining this concept there was some disagreement across groups. While some contended that there was no real difference between "the streets" and "homelessness," others argued that these were overlapping but distinguishable concepts. In general, there was agreement that "the streets" represents a place that is "below" the mainstream. Further, the mainstream was consistently described as being either entirely or generally inaccessible. The general term used for the experience of being outside the mainstream was disenfranchisement (from Pollio, 1991b). Although this discussion was of only limited utility in operationalizing this concept, there was clear support across the focus groups for its value as descriptive label.

Utility for Social Work Practice

In examining the implications of these results for service delivery, it was argued that knowledge of typology membership could lead to greater insight into the development and use of services to individuals on the streets. Different adjustments were thought to have different foci to their needs: those sharing the Getting Out adaptation would desire services around the goal of transitioning out of the street community, those in Getting Over would seek to meet specific concrete needs, and those in the Getting By would be more focused on social activities. It was further suggested that the results indicated a need to provide services on an individual, group, and community level. A set of practice principles organized around these different levels and a discussion of therapeutic implications utilizing these principles across the course of the intervention was presented. Following the argument in the last paragraph that it was best to consider both structural and social constructions, it was argued that a combination of individual empowerment and systems advocacy was necessary to providing "complete" services. Needs during the assessment,relationship building, therapeutic, and termination phase were discussed using a framework consisting of level of intervention by a structural/psychological dichotomy.

The study concluded with a discussion of the implications of using a mixed qualitative/quantitative methodology, limitations of this dissertation, and future research directions implicit in these findings. The initial qualitative phases were seen as giving a rich starting point to the quantitative analysis. The general support for the hypothesis suggested the validity of this research model. The results also support the initial argument that the ethnographic literature is potentially generalizable when taken as body. The limitations of this study included the cross-sectional nature of the data, the lack of an outside comparison population, the generalizability to other urban environments, and the choice of a service-using sample. Finally, it was argued that the piece is best thought of, not as free-standing, but rather as a beginning step. Replication of the findings in a different urban setting and a longitudinal study of entry onto the streets were seen as primary future directions for inquiry.

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